

The Little Gold Curl

By
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ALL of this happened long ago—oh, ever so long ago, my dears! It happened somewhere in the beginning of the '70's. Those were the days when the young ladies wore chignons and long earrings that hung from holes in their pretty ears, and boned basques, and beautiful, stiff, crackling silk overskirts, and blushes that came and went; for then it was not only artificial but lowering to use rouge. And the young gentlemen wore drooping mustaches, and whiskers too if possible, and trousers that would make a present-day skirt apiece. And all the young gentlemen paid the young ladies beautiful, mile-broad compliments, and the ladies looked up from "Lucile" and said archly, "Oh, you gentlemen are so wicked!" And everybody was much, much more romantic than anybody dares to admit being now, but rather politer. It was too late for the stress and trouble of the Civil War, and too early for the present wonderful industrial age to be saying "Hurry up! Hurry up!" to everybody.

And it was just at this pleasant period that Fanny Fleming elected to be nineteen.

She was the dearest little thing that ever was. It was fashionable to be small then, and she was in the height of the mode. Her waist and hands and feet were as tiny as they could be, her hair was yellow, and her eyes were blue, and her cheeks were pink, and altogether she was a stunning little beauty—but a sad flirt.

YOU don't know exactly what that would describe? Well, the young gentlemen knew, you may be sure! It meant a girl who could alternate the valse and lancers half the night, play croquet all the next morning, and go to a picnic all the afternoon, and be rosy and audacious and challenging and light-hearted through it all. It meant all sorts of dear, sprightly, little affectations and darling shepherdess mannerisms for gentlemen only, and a certain fairness in her dealings with girls. She had bosom girl friends, of course. But they hurt her feelings so often by turning out to be cats if their gentlemen admirers grew to prefer her that it really wasn't Fanny's fault if she liked the gentlemen better. There were very few cats among Fanny's gentlemen. Several held the position of Faithful Hound; but that's another matter. Fanny shook her fan, and dimpled and flashed her blue eyes, and enjoyed their efforts very much.

And you mustn't think, because Fanny was such a sad flirt and such a stunning little beauty, that she was nothing else. She could not cook, to be sure, because her mother did not approve of a young lady's knowing how; but she could paint in water colors, sing all Millard's songs, dance divinely, do wonderful erewel work, and kept not only her friends but her own family very fond of her by a very real and constant sweetness and gaiety. She was even supposed to read deep books; but she kept that rather dark, for it was a well known fact that gentlemen didn't like strong-minded women. Arthur Grey, even, was known to have a violent aversion for them, and he was very liberal minded.

Arthur Grey? Why, he was one of her gentlemen admirers, of course. He was tall and dark and mustached and very handsome. He had a quiet dignity that Fanny liked very much; though she never told him so. She only let him infer it. He was not the one she favored most. In fact she trampled on him rather more than she did on the others. He proposed to her with a continuity worthy of a more hopeful cause, and she continued to laugh at him. But she never quite let him go.

"You know, Mr. Grey, there isn't any use asking me again," she would tell him, dimpling so delightfully that it seemed half a joke. "I'm never going to be married. I'm going to be an old maid, and bring up all my little nephews and nieces to love their aunty."

Then she would lean back in her settee on the piazza, with all her voluminous, lacy, frilly skirts billowing round her, and laugh like little bells tinkling, and Arthur Grey would chew the ends of his long, drooping mustache and look heartbroken but determined.

THE particular afternoon when he proposed for the last time but one was a blue-and-gold affair that seemed especially made to match Fanny. She was in blue barege herself; all blue but the little white rose among the gold of her hair, which came down in a curly, childish bang to her eyebrows, and was piled in a big knot on top. From the knot—and this is where the story really begins—swung two dear little light-gold curls.

Now Fanny was of the fortunate young women who can afford to believe in being natural. She never spent any money on the false hair that was an admitted necessity in those days. As she would explain modestly, she did not need to, even if she had approved of it. Her own yellow locks would make a chignon and a bandeau plait to boot, even considering all the front hair snipped ruthlessly off for bangs. But the little trailing top curls were something new and charming, and they attracted Arthur's eye.

"You have wonderful hair!" he said softly, looking at her with adoration in his eyes. "It is like masses of spun gold."

"Oh-h—no-o, it isn't!" said Fanny. "And you say that sort of things to all the girls. Oh, I know wicked tales of you!" But she dimpled ravishly.

"Fanny—Miss Fleming," said Arthur, "you know very well that you are the only girl I ever loved or ever will love. You



"And everybody was much more romantic than now."

hurt me when you say such things. Oh, Fanny, is there no hope for me?"

"Not the least little wee bit—at least, I don't think so," said she, dimpling again. "But of course one is never quite sure!"

"You are playing with me!" said Arthur.

It was a heavenly June day, and Arthur was twenty-four and very much in love. One couldn't well help being in love with Fanny. He went down on one knee beside her chair and caught her hands in his.

"I am going away!" he said. "I am going abroad. There is no use of my standing this torture any longer. But—oh, Fanny—love—mayn't I have one little remembrance of you when I'm far away and forgotten? May I not have one little lock of your hair? It is all I shall ever have of you."

Fanny sat up in the settee. She was a little flattered and a good deal moved; for she knew she had not behaved very prettily to Arthur. But she had no intention of giving such a tangible thing as a lock of her hair to any man alive.

"What a shockingly bold thing to ask!" she said. "Certainly not, Sir!"

Arthur rose and bent over her chair. "Ah, Fanny!" he implored ardently. "It is so little to ask—so little of all I want!"

Fanny looked at him consideringly, sorry for him, but without the slightest intention of doing as he asked. Suddenly a thought struck her, and she began to laugh.

"Perhaps!" she said.

AMONG her other adorers she counted a small nephew of five, her elder sister Nellie's little Donald, an angel-child with eyes as blue and hair as golden and as strong an instinct for mischief as Fanny

owned herself. Now little Donald, at his own pressing request, had ceased to wear long curls and red-velvet skirts some days before. His mother, of course, had gathered up the curls and wept over them, and Fanny had been consoling her when a useful thought had struck her practical little brain.

"Those are lovely curls," she had suggested thoughtfully to her sister. "They would just match our chignons, Nellie. They're a little lighter, but not more than it's natural for the ends of your hair to be."

Nellie dried her eyes. She was nearly as pretty as Fanny, and only twenty-five. "Oh, I couldn't," she said doubtfully. "Dear little Donald's curls—it would feel like sacrilege!"

"Fiddlesticks!" said Fanny cheerfully. "What do you think about it, Donald?"

Donald, very proud of himself and very knightly to his aunt Fanny, gave decision for her immediately. "Go on, take 'em, Mama," he said. "I don't need 'em any more. I'm a man now."

"I suppose we might as well," said his mother reluctantly. "After all, there are plenty left to keep."

The end of it was that Nellie and Fanny mounted the ends of two curls apiece on hairpins with thread, and swung them from their two pretty chignons.

And this was why Fanny Fleming laughed when Arthur Grey begged so hard for a lock of her hair. The naughty thought of giving him Donald's discarded curl was too good to miss.

"The idea of wanting such a silly thing!" she said. "But I suppose one shouldn't refuse a last favor to a parting friend. You can have one of the little curls hanging down from the knot. But don't disarrange my hair—cut it off carefully, mind."

Arthur Grey took out his penknife, and very reverently detached little Donald's hair from its parent hairpin, fortunately firmly anchored under Fanny's chignon. He pressed it to his lips, then kissed Fanny's hand.

"It shall never leave me!" he said abruptly, and walked away.

THE next day Fanny received his card with P. P. C. in the corner. She cried a little, cheered up, and flirted desperately with an unfortunate young man who came over to see her that night. But she felt a little guilty still.

It had struck her at first that the affair of the curl was too good to keep. But on second thought it struck her as being too good to tell. So she confided in no one, not even her sister, and flirted harder than ever with all comers. She had at least three scalps added to her already well-furnished belt in the record time of five weeks and a half.

It was a most successful summer, as far as pleasures and lovers went. Up at the Catskills, where she spent it, scarcely a picnic passed without leaving behind it a heart or so for Fanny Fleming. Yet somehow the summer was not what it had been before Arthur Grey had gone away with his curl, leaving Fanny behind alone with her guilty feeling. If she hadn't deceived him, she mightn't have thought about him at all. But what with worrying as to whether or not she had done wrong and should confess, or hadn't and ought to get the rest of the girls to help her laugh at the joke, there was no way to forget Arthur.

Also she missed, whether or no she acknowledged it to herself, the picturesque background that Arthur Grey's grave worship had afforded her. Nobody played the guitar as he did. Nobody had such fine principles. Nobody sang "Would I Were with Thee" in such a soft, thrilling voice. Nobody was so patient, or so dignified, or so fond of reading Owen Meredith aloud. Nobody was so good looking, or smoked such delicious cigars. The rest of her bodyguard did as well as they could, and Fanny gave them their adoration's